

JJ HENSLEY

Summary: Pilot James J Hensley discusses the highly controversial Texas Chicken maneuver, how pay for a pilot is calculated and the underlying tension between captains and pilots.

Captain of Houston Pilots.
Houston Pilot Association

01:01

Born in Galveston, TX. Raised and schooled in Galveston. UH and then into Navy in 1966 and stayed till 68. Went back to school. and then decided to become a musician. For 6 years, trumpet player. Late Men Plus 1 group's name. Wanted more security and didn't feel like music was a good career. Father was a seaman. Strong family background in sea, merchant marine. Joined navy reserve in high school. Started out as ordinary seamen. Got license in 1978. From deck officer to Houston pilot in 1991. been twenty years as a Houston pilot. Started as seamen in Merchant Marine. Able bodied seamen is a skilled deckhand whereas ordinary seamen is apprenticed one. Took exam and sailed as able bodied seamen for three years. Advance through the ranks by taking exams.

07:00

Merchant Marine academies are for 4 years. Go with no experience and graduate either as a engineer or a deck manager. Did on the job training instead. went to sea and got the accumulated time. Then to become officer, went to navigation school for 6 months.

85% of pilots come through academy. There are seminars given about the maritime industry in schools and high schools. Students have an idea about the industry. Pilots give lectures in several schools on career days.

11:00

Sponsor needed to get accepted as a pilot. Business at the port has really picked up over 20-25 years. Number of pilots required had to increase. Only had 2 year waiting period. Apprentice program then was for 2 years. Now because of increase of volume of work it has become 3years. Learnt procedures on how to run the channel. Basic program followed by all. after 6 months start handling ships on our own. Start with small ships 12,000 gross tonnes, 25 footage raft. After 2 months start increasing tonnage by 1000 tons a month and a foot or two feet a year. End of two year program started with 40 feet and 40,000 gross tonnes. Deepening and widening of channel about 7 years ago.

Have to be voted into the association according to the performance during the 2-3 years of training. Have to buy into the assoc. Each pilot buys an equal share of ownership into the assoc. On the day he becomes a full pilot, he is an equal partner in the assoc. Then it was 54 full pilots and 8 deputies. now 87 full pilots. Number for life.

18:20

Have rotation list and defined by last job done. Take a ship out and bring one back on. Called a double. When double is completed, time is recorded and then placed at bottom of list. At the end of a double, you are guaranteed 16 hours off, rest period. Then eligible to be called. But not during the rest period. Two groups called Black Hats and White Hats. Group on and group off. Black Hats are more reserved and quiet. White Hats are more active, aggressive. Like doing things together, strong sense of camaraderie. Black hats like hanging out by themselves. Number can be called again within 28 hours. Handle 55-60 ships a day. Chemical tankers will carry large number of different products, chemicals are called parcels. Particular tanker might go to one dock to pick up one parcel. Ship goes from dock to dock and don't leave the port. Pilots take ships from one dock to another. These are called shifters. Designate a pilot for a 12 hour span to handle as many ships as he can. If ships coincide time-wise then put another pilot. Maximum of 3 pilots on shift duty.

Shift jobs are shorter and closer to home the whole time. Some pilots don't care for shifts because of the constant back and forth. Takes 4-8 hours to bring a ship back to dock. Ship channel is 52 miles long. Time it takes to bring in a ship depends on how far it has to go and how fast the ship can go. If ship is loaded doesn't travel too fast.

25:00

Pay. Formula for size of the ship, the tonnage and the draft (how much cargo it is carrying), how far up in the channel (there are zones). All that goes into the formula to decide pay. Charge fees according to tariffs allowances that the port allocates. After paying all equipment dues and placing money into the pension plan, the rest of the money is divided up between the pilots.

On turn for two weeks and then off for 2 weeks.

30:00

Deal mostly with tugboats, ship captains, harbor tugs and push boats. The push boats push the barges up and down the channels. Line handlers who tie the ships up, they are a separate entity. Mooring men are boatmen.

Captain is responsible the entire time. Pilot comes onboard and is considered an advisor. Stands by the captain to transport the ship from point A to point B. Pilot is given total access to the ship. Pilot runs the show from then on, but runs it under the responsibility of the Captain.

Accidents. Don't happen frequently. Minor incidents may happen about 7-8 times a year. Every incident goes under investigation to the pilot board. The board hears the counts from all aspects and reviews the situation, come out with ruling. Each incident goes on the pilot's record, port and to the state record. If pilot is found to be incompetent, recommendations can be made.

There are high priority places where traffic is most intense. Most of them are in bends, because of the contours of the bottom of the channel. High volume areas, navigate with caution.

11-13 knots speed in the channel. That is 14-18 miles an hour.

40:00

Texas Chicken. Developed Back in the 40s one way traffic since channel was so narrow. Devised a system where vessels can meet by altering course to their starboard. Media named it Texas Chicken. Unusual maneuver. Done only in a few places in the world. Corpus Christi.

Boarding a ship while underway. Ship always has action in its seaway. When a ship is still it is open to elements. Can control a ship while it is moving. Turn ship to certain course. Define, even and still motion. Go alongside, match speeds with the ship and then climb the Jacob's ladder. A rigid ladder or the boat itself could be damaged. Hence a portable, flexible ladder is used. American Pilots Association has been initiating programs to make sure pilot ladders are up to the standard.

Depth perception at night drops by 70%. 70% of transits are done during the night time. Radars are relied on heavily. Personal navigation units or data from each vessel. Signal gives size, movement, speed and position of the vessel in the channel. With AIS can get good clear picture of the channel and what is going on. Seldom use whistles but speak in terms of whistles.

Since 9/11 every vessel is required to have AIS. It emits a signal that transmits all the info from that ship. Position, speeds of the vessel. For Coast guards - type of cargo that is on the ship. MMSI number is an identification number. With that number can get the name, owner, charterer of ship.

53:00

Sometimes can get a captain who doesn't understand piloting. Constantly questions, or goes over the pilot's boundaries. Have to inject authority and be firm and be persuasive. Pilot's responsibility is first to the state of Texas and to the port. Have to do right by state and port. Use diplomacy. and get point across. Learn to work within the boundaries of the bridge team.

Some look at pilots as a necessary evil. Yet others think the world of pilots. Professional attitude takes precedence over everything else.

59:00

Called a Deputy while training.

Had an incident early on right after training. Sometimes while trying to drop anchor, it just doesn't drop. What helps then is training at ship handling schools. Learnt why a ship does what it does helped avoid certain things. There are times when a ship loses power, When it moves through the water, it will steer, Ship steers because water runs

by the rudder. If there is no flow by the rudder, the ship has no control. Always moving since it is afloat. When no control, must drop anchor, as it holds the position. Never know when ship might lose an engine, before anything happens must drop anchor and make sure control is lost.

Signal for dropping anchor? Normally blow a danger signal, notifies everyone that ship is not under command that it has lost power. Radio commands on VHF. No time to do anything visually unless ship is anchored. Mate will put up the black bulbs. if ship loses power, info through VHF. do everything to notify all about the problem.

01:05:50

Tools. Personal laptop. program for ship channel. Journal with information on vessel. Flashlight.

3 African-American pilots now. 3 women pilots. Wasn't a problem being African-American at all. Never had a problem with ship masters.

Personally have talked to few ladies when they first came in. Gave them the lowdown.

Some ship captains don't want to work with particular pilots. Captains are told to drop anchor and wait for 4 hours while another pilot comes.

01:12

See more of a demand on the expertise of the pilot. With drug testing and no tolerance there are a better brand of applicants. No need to weed out. More intellect.

Communication. cooperation and understanding of certain demands of the channel have all increased. Ships are larger. docks are more crowded. Demand on pilots training are constantly being challenged.

Went to sea at 27. Continuously moved up. been pilot for 20 years.

Rumors about ship channel. Texas Chicken - wait till last minute to alter course. Myth about pilots being prima donna. A bit aggressive.